Alkan's *Esquisses* – past, present and future

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In March 1990 I delivered a talk on Alkan's Esquisses *at Hinde Street Methodist Church, at an Alkan Society event also featuring performances of Books 2 and 4 by John Lewis and Peter Grove. The subsequent newsletter (no 41, June 1990) announces the publication of the substantive content in a subsequent issue. As far as I can tell this never happened! The content did however find its way into a chapter of my final-year undergraduate dissertation at the University of Durham. In the following I take the opportunity to tie up this particular loose end, drawing on the said chapter as a starting point, updating it with further thoughts (mine and others') and reflections on these quirky pieces, in an overview and reminder of what makes them special both in Alkan's output and more generally, timed to coincide with the deadline for the call for members' compositions paying homage to the set.*

As Ronald Smith has shown, the multifarious miniatures which comprise Alkan's *Esquisses* op.63 appear to have been composed, rather than all in one go for publication, over a 14-year period of his career (Smith 1987, p.44). The title of the set might imply sketches from sketch*books*, as if they were preparatory working concepts for other, larger compositional projects. (And they are not without their connections to some of Alkan's larger-scale projects; for instance, the connection between 'Tutti de Concerto' no 15 and the Concerto op.39 – although on stylistic grounds this is more of an off-print than a preliminary sketch; the greater degree of polystylism between (neo-baroque) tutti and (Mendelssohnian) solo passages suggests the vignette is a quirkier spark from the furnace of inspiration which created op.39.) Other, more appropriate comparisons might be made with Beethoven's *Bagatelles*[2]; or more broadly with the 19th-century piano genre of the character piece (*morceau characteristique*). Rather than preparatory sketches they are like an artist's drawings; highly individual and characteristic pieces in their own right, albeit on a smaller scale. The sketching is not compositional but para- or extra-musical: many of the pieces have extra-musical inspiration, often manifested in colourful or descriptive titles (see table 1 below).

As a set of pieces organised in a macro structure, the *Esquisses* sit in the context of Alkan's other cycles placed under a single opus number; into one folder, in the words of Hugh MacDonald (2001, p.378). Yet they are at the opposite pole from the likes of the op.39 Etudes. They represent the most concise and finely-chiselled facet of the composer's approach. In this they effectively rebuff the accusation sometimes made against Alkan's music of undue length and uneven quality-control – consider for example Georges Beck's comments, even in the context of advocacy: 'At the outset two faults must be pointed out: prolixity and inequality'; Beck complains of 'an incontinence of language', allegedly given 'free rein' in Alkan's largest works (Beck 1969). This is echoed then refuted by Steven Osborne: 'Instead of the virtuosic monstrosities I had expected, there were [amongst the *Esquisses*] simple dances, airs, touching fragments, brilliant (but concise) etudes, and an extraordinary variety of character pieces' (Osborne 2003, p.4). The *Esquisses* are certainly models of concision, some of them being only a few lines long, and few of them being more than a couple of pages in length. In this respect they resemble a mode of thought found in strands of 20th-century modernism, such as the piano pieces of Schoenberg, Webern and Berio. Their consistent level of musical invention has been remarked on by writers including Smith and Eddie, who writes: 'Of all Alkan's compositions for piano the esquisses show the composer at his most endlessly creative. The range of canonic awareness is phenomenal and the inventiveness more consistent than many of his other collections' (Eddie 2007, p.129). Despite its somewhat extended gestation, then, the collection forms a more consistent and unified whole (not least through the key scheme) than such other collections as the Preludes and *Chants*. An intriguing, though contested, theory of the symbolic or 'cult' value of the key sequences has been expounded by Yukirou Murai, with the conclusion that the *Esquisses* constitute at once 'a 19th-century *Affektenlehre* book' and Alkan's 'own confession of Jewish heritage or beliefs... a book on music theory embracing deep within its compositional layers Alkan's towering achievement in both music and thought', while not denying 'classical views of the *Esquisses* as a collection of sketches of everyday life or small musical ideas' (Murai 2015, p.15). Whatever one's view of Murai's theory, the macro-structure of the set is remarkably well thought-out, given not only the gestation period but the fact that composition of the *Esquisses* must have been squeezed between the realisation of larger pieces, including the monumental studies of op.39.

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[2] Smith notes a Beethoven connection in no 47 (p.47). The subtitle of the set, '48 motifs', also suggests a Beethovenian impulse.

They have not merely been lumped together for publication as a matter of commercial expedience. Which begs the question: did Alkan plan to execute a set of esquisses as early as the late 1840s, from when the earliest manuscript evidence of one of the constituent pieces dates?[3] Did he take care to compose in keys which would allow for the final double sequence of 24, or transpose pieces to fit the scheme once it had been determined? The fact that the original version of 'Délire' is in D major and appears in the *Esquisses* set transposed to E suggests the latter.

Gathering pieces into larger groups, potentially creating something greater than the sum of its parts is linked, as noted by Brigitte François-Sappey (1991), specifically with French tradition but also the international standard repertoire. It was a commonplace of Baroque practice; the French baroque *clavecinistes*, yes, but not least JS Bach (the 48 preludes and fugues of the *Well-tempered Clavier* are an obvious reference point). A sense of fruitful structural tension results between smaller units and the grander whole (in the case of the *Esquisses*, the whole accommodates pieces which are so short they would scarcely be viable concert works on their own). We find this approach again in 20th-century neo-classicism, whether in Debussy's Preludes, Douze Etudes and projected series of six sonatas for 'divers instruments'; Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis* or Shostakovich's 24 Preludes & Fugues. It is also found in the organ and piano cycles of Messiaen, one of which actually references the title 'esquisses' (*Petites esquisses des oiseaux*, 1985).

François-Sappey invokes Roland Barthes' writings on Schumann's piano cycles in citing 'la mysterieuse coherence organique du "cercle des fragments"', considering the parts relating to the whole like stars grouping themselves into a constellation (pp.70-71).

Stylistic comparisons and sources of inspiration

As noted, when viewed in the overarching context of 19th-century piano music the *Esquisses* fit best into the category of character pieces. As some of Alkan's most original conceptions, comparisons may seem unnecessary. That said, some of the more lyrical *Esquisses* are comparable with both Alkan's own *Chants* and their ultimate model, Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*. Both Smith and Eddie draw attention to the connection between 'Notturnino innamorato' no 43 and the 6th of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* op.30. Eddie also detects an intertextual relationship between 'Fais Dodo' no 33 and Schubert's *Moment Musicale* in A flat, as well as the Austrian composer's harmonic influence on 'Le premier billet doux' no 46 (p.125). Schilling (1991) finds a Schumannesque poetic sensibility in items like 'Confidence', 'Les Soupirs' and 'Attendez-moi sous l'orme' (p.157). Germanic Romanticism surely also pervades the consecutive pair nos 18, the songlike 'Liedchen', and 19, 'Grâces', with its interior pedal beating out the distinctive dactylic rhythm.

Some of the more playful and less technically demanding pieces (such as the 'Rigaudon' and 'Fais Dodo' from Book 3) bear comparison with the various suites of pieces for children which other 19th-century composers wrote and Alkan otherwise didn't – Schumann's *Album for the Young*, for instance[4]. But across the collection as a whole there is considerable variety in technical difficulty, compositional technique, style and topic. All bear Alkan's distinctive compositional stamp, and generally avoid banalities and clichés except for a special point of satire or wit (as in 'Musique Militaire' no 35). As with most of Alkan's music there are pieces which combine great originality with considerable eclecticism – 'Les Frisson' and 'Increpatio' from Book 1 are good examples. As MacDonald puts it, 'Alkan's originality is evident in nearly all his music, but he was in debt to both old and new music [and sometimes seemingly music yet to be written!] for elements of his style' (p.378). Importantly, and not unlike Stravinsky's neoclassical initiative, it was *through* looking back – for instance to Scarlatti, with his proto-clusters, in 'Les Diablotins' no 45 – that Alkan was also able to look forwards to a radically new harmonic world.

Sources of inspiration are very wide, then, both stylistically and with regard to extra-musical ideas. Extra-musical suggestions can be gleaned from many of the titles, described by MacDonald as 'obscure and elliptical, often with a satanic or mocking tone' (p.378). These range from the Classical in subject and phraseology (Alkan was after all a Classical as well as a Biblical scholar) – 'Odo profanum vulgus et arceo', 'Les Initiés' – to the descriptive and poetic or picturesque ('Pseudo-naivité', 'Le Frisson', 'Le

[3] See Smith 1987 (p.44).
[4] Relatedly, it's worth noting the presence of 'La Vision' on the grade 7 syllabus of the London College of Music (as reported in the *Alkan Society Bulletin* 94, p.16), attesting to its pedagogical value.

Table 1: *Esquisses* typology[5]

No	Title	Type
1	La Vision	A
2	Le Staccatissimo	B
3	Le Legatissimo	B
4	Les Cloches	B
5	Les Initiés: Quasi-Coro	B
6	Fuguette	B
7	Le Frisson	C
8	Pseudo-Naïveté	C
9	Confidence	C
10	Increpatio	C
11	Les Soupirs	C
12	Barcarollette	A/B
13	Ressouvenir	C
14	Duettino	B
15	Tutti de concerto (Dans le genre ancien)	B
16	Fantaisie	B/C
17	Petite prélude à trois	B
18	Liedchen	B
19	Grâces	C
20	Petite marche villageoise	A
21	Morituri te salutant	A
22	Innocenzia	A
23	L'homme aux sabots	D
24	Contredanse	A
25	La Poursuite	A
26	Petit air (Genre ancien)	B
27	Rigaudon	A/B
28	Inflexibilité	B/C
29	Délire	C
30	Petit air dolent	B/C
31	Début de quatuor	B
32	Minuettino	A/B
33	((Fais dodo))	B
34	Odo profanum vulgus et arceo: Favete linguis	C
35	Musique militaire	A
36	Toccatina	B
37	Scherzettino	B
38	((Le Ciel vous soit toujours prospère!))	A
39	Héraclite et Démocrite	D
40	((Attendez-mois sous l'orme))	A
41	Les Enharmoniques	B
42	Petit air à 5 voix	B
43	Notturnino-innamorato	B/C
44	Transports	C
45	Les Diablotins	D
46	Le Premier billet doux	A
47	Scherzetto	B
48	En Songe	A
	Laus Deo	A

KEY: A = incident/activity; B = pure music/sound; C = emotion; D = personages

[5] This table is partly inspired by Eddie's classification diagram (p.130), although my 'types' differ from his, being explicitly concerned with domains of reference (Eddie mixes domains of reference with historical/stylistic characteristics).

Premier billet doux') to the specifically technical ('Le Staccatissimo', 'Le Legatissimo'). Table 1 outlines a schema of types, ranging from those with a purely musical or sonic impetus (the latter may involve 'realism') to the evocation of emotion, an incident/activity, or specific personages. Allowing for some overlaps/grey areas in the typology[6], we can see that B is the most common type, confirming Alkan's essential (neo-)Classicism; followed by the Romantic expression implicit in C, followed by the narrative suggestion of A, and lastly the overt pictorialism of D. Despite their rarity in the set, the latter types constitute some of Alkan's most memorable aural images.

In terms of musical style, a wide range of Alkan's creative personality is expressed, from neo-classicism to (literally) *avant-garde* experiments, affirming Alkan's eclectic combination of past traditions with radical originality. We encounter such expected traits (identified by MacDonald) as, for example, the use of military motifs and gestures for rhetorical effect (e.g. 'Musique Militaire' no 35), and the perennial return to a spiritual tone and mood. Particularly noteworthy is the devotional atmosphere at the very end of the set, in the extraordinary Messiaen-like unnumbered 'Laus Deo'[7]. This coincides with a return to C major tonality, which seems to acquire a symbolic value – both the beginning and this ending of the cycle link this key with a calm, radical simplicity not unlike that found in the tintinnabuli compositions of Arvo Pärt[8]. As Smith puts it Alkan comprehends 'both past and future in the continuity of French keyboard music', citing Gorer's observation that Alkan stands 'as a link between the *clavecinistes* and the impressionists of the early years of the twentieth century' (p.44).

Connections with the many short harpsichord pieces by Rameau, and the *ordres* of Couperin, are particularly evident (the latter are even grouped in a similar way to Alkan's op.63). 'Les Soupirs' (no 11) and 'Les Enharmoniques' (no 41) are titles borrowed directly from Rameau. Alkan knew and loved this music, as we know from his inclusion of Rameau pieces in the later Petites Concerts. The pared-down keyboard writing may be inspired by this source: the keyboard style in the *Esquisses* tends to eschew the huge chords, involved figurations and dense 'orchestral' textures of Alkan's earlier keyboard manner. Variety of texture, from unadorned melodic lines (nos 13, 26 and 34), to cluster-like chords (in 'Les Diablotins'), is one area of the collection where originality is especially apparent[9]. Not surprisingly the keyboard writing is close to that of the Sonatine op.61 in its emphasis on clarity, counterpoint, and economy of means. While looking back to Rameau, Couperin and Scarlatti, it also seems to anticipate the pared-down styles of Satie and Bartók. The neo-Classicism present in many of the pieces could be seen as a forerunner of later neoclassicisms, not least those of Stravinsky and Prokofiev.

Concluding thoughts

As a final reflection, let's consider another characteristic identified by MacDonald: the stark juxtaposition of disparate and contrasting elements with no attempt at integration between them, found throughout Alkan's oeuvre but in necessarily concentrated form in the *Esquisses* (which are in many ways a miniature reflection or encapsulation of much of Alkan's output). On one level we have the binary oppositions which Alkan was so fond of – *Marche funèbre* and *Marche triomphale* for instance, or in the context of the *Esquisses* the paired 'Le Legatissimo' and 'Le Staccatissimo' nos 2 and 3. More specific contrast between cynical, sarcastic or diabolical ideas and a sweet, childlike simplicity is found most obviously in 'Les Diablotins' with its radically contrasting Quasi Santo and Quasi Santa modal interludes. This bears comparison with Liszt, Mahler[10] and, to offer a more recent correlative, Alfred Schnittke and other 'polystylistic' composers, in whose music we find (pastiched) old and newer styles sharply juxtaposed and set into relief against each other, and occasionally overlaid. (Here the most striking example from the *Esquisses* is 'Héraclite et Démocrite', with its alternation and eventual overlaying of contrasting stylistic elements – French recitative and Italian aria – in different but related tempi[11].) Such an approach is necessarily eclectic. Yet there have always been eclectic composers. Eclecticism is a key feature of postmodernism (in which context it has gained the status of a methodology, with Charles

[6] For instance, dance-forms may be said to relate to an (other than musical) activity, though certain forms have been so firmly established as musical genres they are arguably purely musical.
[7] Murai links this to the phrase's use as an epithet to 15th-17th century music-theoretical treatises (p.14).
[8] I also hear this quality in the bell-like middle section of Alkan's *Marche funèbre* op.26 (1846).
[9] As pointed out by Schilling (1991) the dissonant sound-world of 'Les Diablotins' is unique for its period (p.166).
[10] See for instance Agawu 2009: 'In the music of Mahler, the essential utterance is heterogeneous at the core' (p.47).
[11] It could be argued that these alternating styles are simply a 19th-century extension of the well-established 18th-century use of musical *topics* (such as stylised dance forms – see Agawu 1991 and 2009). However it's the wider frame of reference, I think, which lifts Alkan's usages beyond the frame of topic theory to the realm of (proto-) polystylism.

Jencks using the term as a verb 'to eclect' (Jencks 1987, p.7). This – at least, at best – doesn't mean merely patching together a series of pastiches and imitations. Disparate elements, rather, are used to create something quite new, not inherent in the original models, through juxtaposition and/or synthesis. Alkan's use of such diverse elements as Jewish music, church modes, the *genre ancien*, neo-classicism, military motifs and pianistic devices – clichés even – can be seen in this light. Writers imbued with the ideology of Romantic/Modernist music historiography, for whom formal and technical innovation and stylistic originality and consistency are praised, and stylistic discrepancy and fetishisation of the past criticised, have found the eclectic and backward-looking elements of Alkan's music problematic. As Eddie observes though, a postmodern approach allows such apparent contradictions, as well as other controversial aspects of Alkan's music, to be accepted and appreciated. Responding to François-Sappey's reference to Alkan's excesses of shape and symbolism, he comments: 'Modern analysis and postmodern aesthetics permits us today to accommodate such excess in a romantic composer' (p.198).

Alkan the postmodernist? Before postmodernism, or even modernism (typically dated, in musical terms, to Debussy's *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune* of 1892-4)? Umberto Eco refers to 'an attempt to make [the term postmodern] increasingly retroactive... gradually it reached the beginning of the [20th] century, then still further back.... I believe [he concludes] that postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category – or better still, a *Kunstwollen*, a way of operating. We could say that every period has its own postmodernism, just as every period would have its own mannerism' (Eco 1985, pp.65-66). It's therefore not surprising that interest in Alkan's music grew at a time (the 1970s – the decade the Alkan society was founded!) when many contemporary composers started re-evaluating their relationship with their musical pasts, moving in many cases towards a new (postmodern) accommodation.

Which brings us neatly back to the call for new esquisses (see the final call which follows this article)

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Yui Morishita's CD of the complete *Esquisses* is reviewed on page 11 of this issue